

# Critical human resource development: enabling alternative subject positions within a master of arts in human resource development educational programme

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## **Critical HRD: enabling alternative subject positions within an MA HRD educational programme**

### Abstract:

We examine how students made sense of the learning that occurred within a curriculum that challenged 'traditional' HRD; a curriculum informed by critical content and critical process. We draw attention to the identity work undertaken by students who were introduced to critical HRD and examine how this discourse enabled alternative 'subject positions'. Drawing on an ethnographic research study informed by a discourse perspective on learning and identity, we explore how students reflected and made sense of their learning and identify eight subject positions: academic practitioner, frustrated practitioner researcher, deep thinking performer, politically aware and active, powerful boundary worker, personally empowered, emancipatory practitioner and personally empowered but disengaged. Drawing on these findings, we question whether the introduction of critical approaches to HRD afforded or prevented articulation and interchange between this educational programme and the students' employing organizations; highlighting the implications for HRD research and practice.

**Keywords:** Critical HRD, critical reflection, discourse analysis, critical management education, subject positions

## **Introduction**

It has been argued that Higher Education is a site of HRD practice, and can shape HRD practice in other work contexts, (Sambrook 2011; Stewart and Harte 2009). This has led to a growing interest, and call for, further research into the relationship between HRD educational programmes and HRD practice, (Kuchinke 2001a; Kuchinke 2001b; Sambrook and Stewart 2010). Rigg et al. (2007:247) argue that, within the UK, the professional education system of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) plays a major role by: *'defining the accepted discourse of the profession.'* Research by Sambrook and Stewart (2010) supports this view and they identified that much HRD curriculum includes models of HRD and descriptions of HRD roles leading to specifications of practitioner competence.

Critical HRD (CHRD) authors have discussed the limitations of the CIPD curriculum (Francis and Keegan 2006) and 'traditional' HRD, (Rigg et al. 2007); in particular, the shared taken-for-granted which constitute, and potentially constrain, HRD theory and practice. They critique the limitations of representationalist organization perspectives (McGoldrick et al. 2002; Stewart 1999) and humanistic assumptions (Kuchinke 2005) about human behaviour and relations, and in particular, the tensions within HRD and the: *'struggle to reconcile the needs of the individual and the needs of the employing organization'* (Elliott and Turnbull 2003: 457). As the scope of HRD practice and HRD curriculum widens, Hodgkinson (2000), for example, explores the role of HE in enabling postgraduate, HRD managers to become familiar with the concept of organizational learning. Mavin et al (2007) consider the link between research and practice, between universities and practitioners, and find practitioners' 'lack of voice' within the profession

and field of HRD. Perhaps in response to this, Sambrook and Stewart (2010) note that there has been a move to adopt critical approaches to HRD education, (Bierema and D'Abundo 2004; Lawless and McQue 2008; Sambrook 2010; Trehan et al. 2004; Trehan et al. 2006), with a focus on critical *content*, critical *process* and adopting methods of teaching, learning and assessment which reinforce a critical approach in HRD practice.

In this paper, we examine how students made sense of the learning that occurred within a curriculum which challenged traditional HRD by introducing critical content and critical process.

### **Research context: the Master of Arts in Human Resource Development (MAHRD)**

The MA in HRD was designed to offer a vehicle for the continuing professional development of HRD practitioners. The programme was an advanced standing masters and entrants to the programme held a relevant postgraduate diploma awarded by the professional body, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and had a minimum of three years experience at management level. The twenty two students who participated in this study were members of the CIPD and were in full time paid employment as senior HRD professionals. Age ranged from mid thirties to early fifties and the majority were white females. From our experience this group represented the relative homogeneous nature of CIPD members.

These senior practitioners attended part time and the majority took a year to complete the qualification. The focus was on a process radical pedagogy with some elements of a content radical pedagogy (Reynolds 1997). Radical content was introduced during the induction to the programme, in particular ideas from CHRD and social constructionist

perspectives on learning (Sambrook and Stewart 1998; Stewart 1999) which challenged more dominant individual performance perspectives. The academics teaching the programme emphasised the concept of the critically reflective practitioner (Reynolds 1998). Critically reflecting on practice is a central feature of critical perspectives on management education (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Reynolds 1998; Willmott 1994). These perspectives are underpinned by an emancipatory agenda and offer a vision of a fairer and more just society, however the language of critical education challenges the performative language of New Higher Education (NHE), (Winter 1991) and competes with other discourses within management and management learning (Fairclough and Hardy 1997). This paper reveals discursive struggles as students were introduced to CHRD discourse.

Participative learning methods, compatible with a process radical pedagogy, were emphasised throughout the programme and action-learning sets were utilised to support the dissertation stage. Students were required to complete three assessments in order to achieve the MA: a consultancy report, a research proposal and a dissertation. The first two were smaller pieces of work designed as preparation for the final dissertation. All the assessments were work-related, requiring the students to critically engage with and apply theory to work problems or issues. Students were also required to produce reflective learning accounts after they had submitted an assessment. These accounts were marked as a 'pass' or 'not yet competent'. The intention was to enable students to become critically reflective HRD practitioners as they proceeded on their masters journey.

### **A discourse perspective on learning and identity**

HRD has been conceptualised as a '*social and discursive construction*' which has been talked into being (Sambrook 2000; Sambrook and Stewart 1998). This conceptualisation of HRD supports an examination of the discourses which compete to define HRD. Attention is now focused on how discourse is put together and what is gained by this construction. This highlights that language does not just describe things, it does things, (Potter and Wetherell 1987); and the things that it does have important implications: '*individually (in terms of identity), socially (in terms of social construction) and politically (in terms of the distribution of power).*' (Trowler 2001: 186). Discursive psychology informs this research which focuses on: '*people's active and creative use of discourse as a resource for accomplishing social actions in specific contexts of interaction.*' (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002: 21). Although the focus is on everyday discourse this approach acknowledges that individuals are both products, and producers, of discourse in specific contexts of interaction. A discourse perspective opens up the prospect of researching practice through studying the talk/action in use. The focus is therefore on how people use the available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of the world and identities. This enables a focus on the language in use and the 'subject positions' (Edley 2001) which emerged as students fashioned relations of identity. This draws attention to the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking and the positioning which occurs as people actively take up positions within different and sometimes competing discourses.

This research is also informed by critical discourse analysis and incorporates the broader social context as advocated by Contu and Willmott (2003) by drawing attention to the 'order of discourse' viewed as '*... a network of social practices in its language aspect*' (Fairclough 2003:24). So orders of discourse can be seen as the social organization and control of linguistic variation potentially made available to the MA HRD

students. This draws attention to dominant discourses (traditional HRD) and how these discourses can channel meaning and attention within HRD talk and literature limiting the emergence of a more critical discourse (Francis 2007).

The main focus of the research reported here is on the local construction of discourse, where discourse is viewed as an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon. By focusing on discourse as the object of analysis and exploring patterns in and across statements we identify the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality. We also explore whether or not the introduction of an alternative critical discourse impacted on the students. In doing so, we address the following research questions:

- How did the introduction of CHRD discourse influence learning within this MA programme?
- Can the notion of 'subject positions' provide insight into the relationship between the educational programme and the employing organization?

### **The Methodological Framework**

The research has been informed by ethnographic principles applied to a working situation, specifically the teaching and facilitation on the MA programme. The lead author is the Programme Director, and as such provides an insider, emic perspective. A key problem for much ethnographic research is the struggle between closeness and closure. This can be particularly problematic when researching one's own practice. Alvesson (2003:188) acknowledges that: '*cultural belongingness means a high degree of closure to the rich variety of potential ways of interpreting one's organization*' and

cautions that the self-ethnographer must make strong efforts to avoid 'staying native'.

One way to avoid 'staying native' is to acknowledge and reflect upon data as constructions and to interpret data from a temporal distance and a fresh theoretical perspective, (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002). Examining the discourses accessed provides a fresh perspective and enables distancing. Co-constructing this paper has also provided a fresh perspective as the material has been subjected to other questions by the involvement of the two co-authors; both have been external examiners on the programme. These, critical friends, provide an outsider, etic perspective.

From the outset students were made aware of the lead author's research interests and the broad framework of 'value' to self and the employing organization provided framing questions. These broad questions provided a way into reflective sessions as students participated in the MA programme. Throughout the programme a process radical pedagogy was emphasised in order to acknowledge and 'manage' potential power imbalances. We recognise that there are asymmetrical power relations between tutors and students which could have placed an obligation on the students to consent (Rigg and Trehan 2004). Therefore, steps were taken to minimise these effects. Periodically throughout the programme students were reminded of the research and permission was sought for material to be used. We recognise that students may not have been fully aware of that to which they were consenting. Therefore, in the spirit of 'informed consent' (Mason 2002) opportunities were taken to make students more aware, for example, by discussing why, how and where their words might be used, and providing examples of journal articles which included students' accounts. It could be argued that as students participated in the educational programme their consent became more 'informed'. After they had successfully completed the programme, students were asked to confirm if their



accounts (appropriately anonymised) could be utilized for research and potential publication.

One of the processes by which material becomes data is selection and what count as data depends on theoretical assumptions about discourse and the broad topic of research, (Wetherell et al. 2001). Material has been generated from two cohorts of the MA programme with a total of 22 students successfully completing within the timescales available for this research. We focused on the transcripts of individual interviews which were undertaken by the lead author after students had submitted the final assessment, the dissertation. We have also focused on the final written reflective learning accounts produced by students after they had been interviewed. We have used pseudonyms to preserve anonymity and protect individuals from potential harm; we have also provided some brief contextual information after each quote.

Wetherell et al. (2001) highlight that within discourse analysis there is not one analytical method, rather a broad theoretical framework which focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader's skills in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation. Therefore the basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis is the argument that people's talk fulfils many functions and has varying effects. Statements are therefore interpreted as saying something about norms for expression and attention is given to the effects produced.

### Process of analysis

We analysed the students' accounts in terms of: '*what they accomplish rather than what they mirror- as action rather than in terms of true/false*' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:123).

This acknowledges the multitude of subject positions that can be constituted in such a situation. Therefore, we re-read the transcripts of the final reflective interviews and final reflective learning accounts, looking for a systematic patterning and variation between accounts. The analytic process consisted of three key stages (Potter and Wetherell 1987): preliminary stage – illustration of variation between accounts; second stage – functional level of analysis; and third stage – confirmation through exception. Edley (2001) argues that the trick to spotting subject positions is familiarity with one's data and that a time comes when one feels as though one has heard it all before. This is similar to 'theoretical saturation' (Mason 2002; Silverman 2005) and is a further way in which material is selected as data. Therefore, the process of analysis involved searching for patterns in the data by exploring variability and consistency within different accounts.

Consistency involved identifying features shared by the accounts indicating the use of a particular subject position, the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking, (Edley 2001). Exploring the variations within accounts was analytically useful as it reminded us of the danger of taking accounts at face value, as accurate descriptions. Therefore, accounts were viewed as serving a function as students looked back and made sense of their masters journey. From this perspective: *'it is the productive tensions that exist between different themes which prompts conversation itself.'* (Edley 2001:204).

The analysis of function is not simply a matter of the analyst categorizing pieces but depends on the analyst reading the context (Potter and Wetherell 1987). For this paper we have read the context from a discourse perspective which highlights how the self is talked about, how it is theorised in discourse and the discursive functions served by alternative interpretations.

These alternative interpretations or 'subject positions' involve a process of negotiation as people actively take up positions within different, and sometimes competing, discourses. This recognises that people are both products of specific discourses and producers of talk in specific contexts and as such they are both subjects of discourse and agents in cultural reproduction and change. As agents, individuals are limited by the discourses which exist. However, discourses can be used as flexible resources in arguing and, by combining them in new ways, can contribute to change and identify construction. Predominately, the subject positions have emerged from the data though we had been sensitised to particular concepts as identified by our review of the literature.

The final stages of the analytical process involved revisiting the coding to ensure that the conceptual categories did actually fit the empirical material and then linking issues and concepts as patterns emerged, seeking and exploring confirmation through exception. From a social constructionist perspective all knowledge is considered to be situated, contingent and partial. Therefore, our interpretation of the data is not being presented as a truth but an analysis underpinned by a social constructionist perspective and discourse analysis theory.

Prior to the individual interviews students were provided with a written brief explaining the purpose and process of critical reflection. Within this document the underlying philosophy of the programme, a philosophy compatible with our notion of CHRD, was reiterated by reference to Reynolds (1998:198)

The aim of management education.... should not be to fit people into institutions as they currently exist, but to encourage them in questioning and confronting the

social and political forces which provide the context of their work, and in questioning claims of (common sense) or (the way things should be done).

In addition, the four key characteristics of critical reflection were summarised: concerned with questioning assumptions; focus is social rather than individual; pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations and concerned with emancipation. We recognise that these four characteristics are interconnected but have separated them for analytical purposes presenting them as a heuristic device to illuminate the research question and to explore the notion of a CHRD discourse.

## **Findings**

The findings for this paper focus on how students looked back and made sense of the learning that occurred on their masters journey. The account presented below has been co-constructed by us and we have utilised the four characteristics of critical reflection (Reynolds 1998) to explore how participants constructed the 'patchwork' (Edley 2001) of the final reflective interview and the final reflective written account.

### **Talk about questioning taken-for-granted assumptions**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the context provided, all students (both within the individual interviews and their written accounts) talked about becoming more questioning and less accepting of academic literature. This is illustrated by Jack:

One of the most important skills I have learnt whilst on the programme is the ability to critically reflect and evaluate. This is the action of challenging theories

and concepts that are treated as norms asking the question 'so what?' ...it has opened up a new way of thinking for me and increasingly I am approaching my daily working tasks in the same way. (Interview, Jack, Retail)

Jack talks about '*a new way of thinking*' and asking '*so what?*' questions, in doing so he accesses elements of a CHRD discourse, the questioning of taken-for granted assumptions. This talk was evident in all students' accounts and is further illustrated by Amy :

The knowledge of research methods and philosophies has affected my response not just to organizational reports but to academic research in general. I am far less ready to accept 'research findings' now than I was at the outset of the course. (Written account, Amy, Manufacturing)

Amy talks about becoming more questioning and attributes this to her increased knowledge '*of research methods and philosophies*'. All students talked about being more confident and more questioning, they attributed this to reading academic literature and research knowledge and skills.

All students talked about becoming more questioning in work; within her final written account Jill reflects:

At work, I have noticed that colleagues use me much more as an information source and as an equal. I am not sure whether this is because my views are more soundly based and of more value or that the culture is academically elitist so a Masters student is more acceptable. (Written account, Jill, Education)

Jill talks about how her increased confidence in her academic abilities and how her increased questioning has raised her profile in work '*an equal*'. Her talk also provides some insight into the perceived 'use' or 'exchange' value of the MA qualification as she questions whether her '*views are more soundly based*' or her organization is '*academically elitist*'.

Drawing on a particular aspect of CHRD discourse, the questioning of taken-for granted assumptions, students constructed a subject position which we have called the: '**academic practitioner**'. Interestingly this talk about questioning assumptions focused more on the questioning of academic literature and research methodologies. Students talked about how this questioning had given them confidence and a new language to question in work, in particular to question reports and internal research findings. Within the written accounts all students claimed that their questioning was welcomed. However the interview accounts were more varied and some students talked about the need to develop social support for questioning, as illustrated in the following section.

#### Talk about social learning

All students talked about the need to develop support for their research from a wider social group. This was highlighted by Emily during her individual interview:

I feel that acting as a researcher does enhance your position at work but that this is dependent upon the extent to which you promote the work that you do to your colleagues and superiors. (Interview, Emily, Local Government)

However, later in the interview she talked about the difficulties she had encountered in '*broadcasting her action points*' and the frustrations in getting others to '*see a different point of view*'. She continued:

...if you look at the culture of the business team, they seem to have a lot of sway in the organization, and they just want a tick in a box. So I think the thing that I have learnt from the masters is that trying to actually get somebody to agree or see a different point of view is very difficult. (Interview, Emily, Local Government)

Many students talked about this '*very difficult*' position. In doing so they constructed a subject position which we have called the: '**frustrated practitioner researcher**'. Many students also talked about the difficulties involved in developing social support within their organization. For these students the MA programme provided the only opportunity they had to talk about their research.

However, most students also talked about using the MA action learning set meetings to articulate and rehearse how they might talk about their research within work. James stated:

We've been able to talk to each other quite openly and quite frankly about some of our experiences. We're not just talking about experiences we're also thinking about how we need to put that information across in work. I can think deeper about what I'm trying to say and the set members give me some help in answering my own questions so I know what to say when I'm in work. (Interview, James , Charity)

James signals differences between the MA programme '*I can think deeper*' and his employing organization. He talks about using the MA to rehearse so he can know '*what to say when I'm in work*'.

Most students talked about the MA as a safe place to question and '*think deeper*' about work; to question and rehearse what they might say in work. In doing so they constructed a subject position which we have called the: '**deep thinking performer**'

All students recognised and talked about learning as a social, rather than an individual, process. They also talked about the power relations inherent in learning.

#### Talk about power relations

All students talked about an increased awareness of power and politics within the work organization. However, two students talked about, but did not question, the existing structures of power. This is illustrated by Charlotte:

Personally, I feel I am more politically aware and how the political arena has a great impact on the strategic decisions we make in my organization. (Written account, Charlotte, NHS)

In using the word '*we*', she indicates that she is accepting of the existing organizational hierarchy. In doing so she constructs a subject position which we have called: '**politically aware and politically active**'. This subject position was evident in a few accounts and was often located along side another subject position which we have



called the: '**powerful boundary worker**'. This subject position is illustrated by Sophie who talks about being 'head hunted'.

As a result of doing this piece of work ...I have been head hunted to take on a new role in twelve months. ...producing the strategy has put me in touch with (named very senior people in the organization). I'm actually working at a strategic level and I think that has added value to me, the organization and to a larger unit, the public. (Interview, Sophie, Army)

For these students articulation and interchange between the MA and the employing organization was unproblematic. However, as the interviews progressed and students' reflected further on their experiences, several students began to talk about emancipation.

#### Talk about emancipation

During the individual interviews and in the written accounts all students talked about questioning their personal values and individual transformative learning, as illustrated by Chloe:

I can't help but feel that from actually going and doing my masters that has helped me to actually take a look at myself. A lot of that is reflecting on me as an individual so I suppose to sum up it is more like self-confidence. It's about being in control, being in control of what you want and certainly looking at what I want. (Interview, Chloe, Banking)

She talks about '*being in control*' and '*looking at what I want*'; in doing so she constructs a subject position which we have called: '**personally empowered**'. This subject position was evident in all accounts and while it showed evidence of personal emancipation this was not always related back to the employing organization.

However, some students also talked about how a fairer organization might be created.

During her interview Jane talked about her dissertation on secondment:

I came across a number of things that I don't suppose surprised me but highlighted to me some of the difficulties within the organization, the political sensitivity ...Initially I was surprised the negativity towards the development of people, there almost seems to be this feeling of they need to be brought down a peg or two when they come back...The organization goes out of its way to stop people being sociable it is not geared for this we could improve that. (Interview, Jane, Local Government)

Jane talks about emancipation '*we could improve that*'. Her use of the word '*we*' indicates that she continues to be engaged with the employing organization and her talk, while problematizing the relationship between the MA programme and the employing organization, is underpinned by the basic belief that the her employer can and should benefit from her research. Several students continued to talk about this basic belief and when they combined this with an emancipatory ideology constructed a subject position which we have called the: '**emancipatory practitioner**'. This subject position highlights the possibilities of CHRD.

However, one student (Lucy) with an emancipatory ideology challenged the belief that her organization would benefit from her research. She talked about the '*circle of wagons approach*' within her organization.

Doing the course has given me a greater feeling of unsettlement and the relationship with the organization is coming towards the end of its life cycle. If the organization's values in reality are so different from your own and you see how people should be treated and developed particularly, there comes a time when you need to be looking to moving on and I feel I am at that stage now. I have known this for some time but the course has reaffirmed that since and it has given me the confidence to see that you do not have to be tied to the apron strings of this organization; you have skills to offer to another organization.

(Interview, Lucy, Army)

In talking about '*how people should be treated*' she draws attention to an emancipatory ideology. However, she talks about the organization's values being different to her own and how she feels she has '*the confidence*' and needs to be '*moving on*'. We have called this subject position: **personally empowered but disengaged**'. For this student articulation and interchange between the MA programme and the employing organization was very problematic. This subject position highlights the dilemmas of CHRD and critical management education and we will return to this issue in our conclusion.

### Summary of Findings

Given the context of production and the function of students' accounts, to articulate what they had learnt from the MA programme, it is unsurprising that they accessed CHRD discourse as they talked about: questioning assumptions, social learning, power relations and emancipation. These alternative 'subject positions' are performed moments within these discursive situations, the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking, (Edley 2001). This involves a process of negotiation as the students' actively take up positions within different and arguably competing discourses. We present the table below, not as a general or transferable typology of students, but rather as one illustration of discursive struggle as students accessed the available discursive resources and constructed alternative subject positions. The positions we suggest are indicated by our analysis and are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: CHRD - enabling alternative subject positions**

<b>Characteristics of Critical Reflection</b>	<b>Subject position</b>	<b>R'ship between MA programme and the employing organization</b>	<b>CHRD Discourse</b>
<b><i>Questioning taken-for granted assumptions</i></b>	1. The academic practitioner	<u>Unproblematic:</u> Employing organization unquestioned	Assimilated
<b><i>Social learning</i></b>	2. Frustrated practitioner researcher	<u>Very Problematic:</u> MA only support	Situated
	3. Deep thinking	<u>Problematic but</u>	Situated

	performer	<u>resolvable:</u> MA provides support to rehearse when in employing organization.	
<b><i>Power relations</i></b>	4. Politically aware & politically active	<u>Unproblematic:</u> Employing organization unquestioned	Assimilated
	5. Powerful boundary worker	<u>Unproblematic:</u> Employing organization unquestioned	Assimilated
<b><i>Emancipation</i></b>	6. Personally empowered	<u>Problematic but (potentially) resolvable:</u> MA programme enabled personal development may or may not transfer to employing organization	Situated
	7. Emancipatory practitioner	<u>Problematic but resolvable</u> MA programme supported questioning of values and optimistic and willing to transfer this to employing	Situated

		organization	
	8. Personally empowered but disengaged	<u>Very problematic</u> MA programme supported questioning of values but pessimistic and unwilling to transfer this to the employing organization	Situated

### **Discussion**

The table above illustrates how the introduction of CHRD discourse influenced learning within this MA programme and the subject positions which emerged. The table also draws attention to how a CHRD discourse was assimilated or situated as students talked about becoming critically reflective practitioners. This provides insight into the relationship between the MA programme and the employing organization and whether this relationship was constructed as: unproblematic; problematic but resolvable; or very problematic.

From a CHRD perspective we would argue that three of the eight subject positions we have formulated (subject positions 1, 4 and 5) assimilated a CHRD discourse and were constrained by traditional HRD discourse. In particular, the limitations of representationalist organization perspectives and humanistic assumptions. The 'academic practitioner' talked about questioning academic literature, but not the taken-for-granted of the organization. This acceptance of the current status quo within the

organization was evident within two other subject positions: 'politically aware and politically active' and the 'powerful boundary worker'. Students who actively took up these subject positions appeared to be in a very powerful position as they accessed the discourse of CHRD but remained situated within a traditional discourse.

Reynolds (1999:178) discusses the dangers of assimilation, where CHRD is stripped of its '*socio-political element*' and emancipatory potential to be converted into a managerial toolkit to serve the interests of those in power whilst '*leaving the superficial impression that a more critical approach has been applied*' to the HRD process. Subject positions 1, 4 and 5 illustrate how this occurred and for these students the relationship between the MA programme and the employing organization was unproblematic. The basic belief that the organization would benefit from the students involvement in the programme remained evident in most students' accounts. This unproblematic belief underpinned subject positions 1, 4 and 5 and was not questioned. Students who positioned themselves within these subject positions accepted the existing power relations and the existing hierarchy; using their new language to gain access to senior people within the organization and therefore support for themselves and their research. For these students the relationship between the MA programme and the employing organization was unproblematic.

In contrast, students who situated themselves within a CHRD discourse began to question whether the organization could benefit from their research. These students appeared to be in a more difficult, and a potentially powerless, position. Two subject positions (2 and 8): 'frustrated practitioner researcher' and 'personally empowered but disengaged' provide insight into this positioning and the dilemmas of critical management education. Students who actively took up these positions talked about the

difficulties of gaining the support of senior people and highlighted differences between the MA programme and the employing organization. They talked about a very problematic relationship.

Critical educators have, for some time, acknowledged the complications which can arise when critical reflexivity is introduced within the context of educational programmes (Brittan and Maynard 1985; Brookfield 1994; Fenwick 2005a). In particular, the manager who begins to question taken-for-granted assumptions can begin to feel isolated from his or her community. This 'complication' is illustrated above. However, Dehler et al. (2004) argue that critical management education offers a more appropriate skill set than does the mainstream and prepares managers for complexity, uncertainty, equivocality and value conflicts by raising their level of 'complicated understanding'. Students who began to situate their talk within a CHRD discourse began to develop a more 'complicated understanding' of themselves and their organizations.

This is further illustrated by subject position 3, the 'deep thinking' performer, who talks about a problematic but resolvable relationship between the MA programme and the work organization; where the MA provides support to rehearse: *'what to say when I'm in work'*. A problematic, but potentially resolvable, relationship was also central to subject position 6, 'personally empowered'. All students situated themselves within this subject position and in doing so claimed that the MA programme had enabled them to personally develop. However they did not question whether this would transfer to the organization.

A central feature of CHRD is an emancipatory agenda, Reynolds (1998) argues that emancipation espouses an ideology that a just society might be created through reasoning which entails a historical and contextual perspective. However, Rigg and



Trehan (2004:62) highlight that '*there is no inevitable flow between individual transformatory learning and critical practice at an organization or societal level*'. The 'personally empowered' subject position illustrates how this occurred within this MA programme. In contrast, subject position 8, 'emancipatory practitioner' remained optimistic that critical practice could be transferred within the organizational context.

Our findings illustrate how the introduction of a CHRD discourse influenced learning within this MA programme. Some students assimilated the discourse with traditional HRD and in doing so used the new language to strengthen their personal positions within the existing organizational hierarchy. Others situated themselves within a CHRD discourse and in doing so began to develop a more 'complicated understanding' of themselves and their organization. In problematising the relationship between the MA programme and the employing organization they opened up the possibilities of realising a CHRD agenda, enabling the emergence of a fairer and more just organization. It is this promise of CHRD which inspires us and future research work will focus on the robustness and sustainability of the identified subject positions within an organizational context.

## **Conclusions**

From the perspective of CHRD, students were arguably constrained by their earlier socialisation which we have attributed to their earlier participation in the CIPD educational programme which emphasises traditional HRD. Some students, in talking about their learning from the MA programme, continued to access traditional HRD, others selectively integrated elements of CHRD.

This positioning can be interpreted as students' attempts to (re) author themselves as moral beings. A similar finding is reported by Clarke et al. (2009:323) who highlight the *'complex and ambiguous effects of organizationally based disciplinary practices and individuals' discursive responses to them'*. Critical approaches to management education are distinctive in that they strive to connect with the broader social structures of power, rather than the traditional liberal humanist concerns which focus on self awareness and personal tolerance (Grey and Antonacopoulou 2004). However, most management students have a formulated interest in becoming managers of others within existing organizations and *'they are unlikely to nurture aspirations for leading revolutionary social change'* (Fenwick 2005b:34).

However, students who situated their talk with a CHRD discourse illuminate the emancipatory potential for themselves and possibly the employing organization. Sambrook (2007) argues that currently CHRD is largely an academic concept but could have profound implications for HRD practice. However, as Wilson (2007:7) argues: *'Human resource development is 'sold' as a junior partner forming a subsidiary part of human resource management. A look at the programmes in business and management schools confirms that the main subject is HRM and there is less mention of HRD.'* Sambrook (2007) advocates emancipating HRD from HRM creating space for a critique of all things associated with learning, disconnecting learning and development activities from the dominant performative paradigm. This research contributes to such a critique and offers insight into an emerging 'hegemonic struggle' which opened a discursive space for alternative subject positions and alternative ways of becoming a HRD practitioner within a performative oriented employing organization.

Creating such a space for critique can support an activist orientation within CHRD and critical management studies more widely. Spicer et al. (2007) argue for some tactics including critical pragmatism, engaging selective forms of resistance, building weak utopias and an overriding commitment to micro emancipation. The MA programme provided a safe place for students to question some of their taken for granted assumptions regarding the practice of HRD within their employing organizations. This safe place is compatible with the concept of 'heterotopia' (Hjorth 2005) described as: *'spaces of play that encourage the exploration and imagination of alternative modes of being and doing'* (Spicer et al. 2009:16). The subject positions we illuminate are possibilities, alternative ways of 'becoming' which have practical implications for HRD practice in both higher education and work organizations. These alternative ways of becoming illustrate how students on this MA programme reconciled their needs for learning with the needs of the employing organization and how some subject positions appear to be better placed to reconcile the inevitable tensions between learning and performance. This draws attention to how HRD professionals are educated and developed from a critical perspective, and with potential wider consequences such as how discourses of (C)HRD are employed in organizations, how HRD professionals then develop managers, how these managers might then manage and develop their colleagues, and how managers might view (C)HRD.

This research was conducted in a single case study higher education institution in the United Kingdom, focusing on one HRD programme and two cohorts, which may be considered a limitation. However, we suggest our findings have wider implications in the international HRD education context. We have considered the role of discourse in HRD education and practices, illuminating the struggles HRD students face as they strive to

reconcile their needs for learning with the performative needs of the employing organization.

We have also considered the impact on students' emerging perceptions of and identity within their work organizations. However, whilst not making a case for generalisability, we suggest that our findings regarding the introduction of a critical approach to HRD opens up the possibility for discussion in other educational contexts, perhaps particularly where a performative HRD discourse dominates, or in contexts where HRD education is only beginning to emerge and could be receptive to a healthy debate of potentially competing discourses. We might also consider our research in light of Iles and Yolles' (2002) work 'Across the great divide' where in this case we are examining HRD, discursive translation, and knowledge migration in bridging the gap between organizations and universities.

Bierema and D'Abundo (2004) talk of HRD as being the conscience of an organization, and how HRD professionals can help senior managers develop more ethical and sustainable organizational activities. However, Sambrook (2011) reminds us that there is a growing voice that challenges us to question the interests served by HRD interventions - what goals, and whose goals are we pursuing? As educators we are committed to an emancipatory agenda but must remain reflexive about our practice and the consequences for our students as they strive to partially and temporally participate in an educational programme while maintaining a full and more permanent participation in an employing organization.

We conclude by suggesting further research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of a CHRD education on professional practice, and organizational tenure. Second,

further research is needed to substantiate the abstracted identities we have constructed from student accounts. Are these applicable in other national and international contexts? Are there other identities in different international HRD educational contexts? An additional direction of research could usefully focus on relationships between the notions of 'critical HRD' and 'critical reflection', perhaps incorporating the work of Brookfield (2000) and of van Woerkom (2010) on the latter. Finally, there are many other important questions, such as: what is the role of national economy, culture and political systems in creating acceptable HRD discourses?

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